

Greek Left Leaders Betrayed The Working Class. Conservatives Won A Landslide



The ascendance of the right in Greek politics shows how a left without strong class politics is a losing proposition.

Greece's conservative party New Democracy won another landslide victory in the country's second election in just five weeks, trouncing Syriza, the so-called radical leftist party, by an even wider margin than in the first election. New Democracy finished by almost 23 points ahead of Syriza, a result that allows the conservatives to control 158 seats in the country's 300-seat parliament. Moreover, the result of the June 25 Greek elections makes New Democracy "the most powerful center-right party in all of Europe," as its leader and prime minister for a second consecutive term Kyriakos Mitsotakis aptly noted in the aftermath of his party's historic victory.

Why are the conservatives so popular in debt-ridden Greece, and what lessons can be gained for the left worldwide from the electoral collapse of Syriza? Political scientist and political economist *C. J. Polychroniou* discusses these questions with French-Greek journalist *Alexandra Boutri* in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*.

Alexandra Boutri: Immediately following the results of the Greek parliamentary elections of May 21, which saw the conservative party of New Democracy win by an astonishing 20-point margin over the radical leftist party Syriza, you published an essay titled "[The Rise and Fall of Greece's Radical-in-Name-Only Syriza Party.](#)" Well, in the repeat election on June 25, Syriza lost to New Democracy by an even bigger margin. Are you surprised at all by the electoral results? For many people, I suppose, it is still hard to explain the implosion suffered by Alexis Tsipras's party when only eight years ago it was the governing party.

C. J. Polychroniou: I am not in the least surprised by the even bigger margin that New Democracy won over Syriza. If anything, the only surprising element in the evolution of Greek politics over the past 15 years or so was Syriza's meteoric rise to power. We know of course that politics is always dynamic, but it's hard to find another case in contemporary European history where a political party of any ideological orientation rose to power when it was struggling 10 years earlier to win just 4 percent of the vote.

What was even more surprising in this development is that Syriza was hardly a political party per se. It was more of a protest political organization that included many different factions of the Greek left, all under one roof. However, it evolved very quickly once the balance of power started changing in its favor. Within a year or two before its rise to power, Syriza, under the leadership of Alexis Tsipras, transformed itself into an inclusionist populist party after having successfully tapped into the anti-austerity anger that had spread across different segments of the Greek population on account of the notorious bailout programs that had been signed in the aftermath of the outbreak of the Greek/euro crisis by the nation's two mainstream parties, the socialists (PASOK) and the conservatives (New Democracy) respectively. Yet, it took Alexis Tsipras only a few weeks after coming to power in 2015 to capitulate to the demands of the deeply hated troika of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and eventually to sign a third bailout agreement that extended Greece's status as Germany's de facto colony.

But Greek voters, especially those on the left, do not in general have short memory or faulty perceptions. Not only did they not forget Syriza's betrayal, but they also did not miss how incompetent its leadership had been when it came to overall governance. Tsipras and his inner circle aligned themselves with big capital, ignored the working class, squeezed the middle class as much as they could and proceeded with massive privatization schemes — all in order to satisfy the international creditors.

In May 2019, Syriza lost the national elections after having lost both the European and local elections. It paid the price for having become another mainstream party. But what may have sealed its complete downfall was that during the time it was in opposition it engaged for the most part in outrageous, petty politics (such as attacking the prime minister's wife, for example, and saying that the country was being run by a junta!), thus failing miserably to act as the

main opposition party. The ruling party's policies went largely unchallenged, and voters could not find in Syriza a convincing alternative consistent with the values of the left.

In light of the above, it is anything but surprising that in both the May and June elections, Syriza suffered big losses even in working-class districts of major urban centers. Indeed, Syriza is the only party of the left in the last 40 or so years to have lost support in the traditional working-class districts of Greece. I am also not surprised at all by the fact that Yanis Varoufakis's MeRA25 party, which was established in 2018, failed to make it into the parliament. Varoufakis may be very popular abroad but remains extremely unpopular with Greek voters of all political persuasions.

However, what is quite surprising to me about these elections is the low voter turnout (slightly over 52 percent), which continues to drop to a new historic low. Not only that, but like in many other parts of the world, the Greek youth is shifting to the right for solutions to today's societal problems. This is a truly discouraging development, and I am not sure what it will take to turn things around. In this context, what is even more disturbing is the fact that far right parties have made a comeback in Greece less than three years after party leaders of Golden Dawn, a neo-Nazi political organization, were convicted of being part of a criminal organization and sent to prison. Three far right parties, with a combined total of nearly 13 percent of the popular vote, have won seats in Greece's next parliament. This was the most shocking surprise of the Greek legislative elections that took place on June 25.

My understanding is that Greek society is fairly conservative and that the party of New Democracy has a rather miserable record when it comes to respecting democratic values and human rights. If this is so, why is Mitsotakis's government so popular?

You are right on both counts. Greek society is indeed quite conservative to this day and democratic and human rights have received acute blows under Mitsotakis's New Democracy government, which is mainly composed of neoliberal hacks and traditional authoritarian right-wingers. But that's not an odd combination. Ever more increasingly, economic neoliberalism needs political authoritarianism in order to carry out its so-called reforms.

Conservative social orders maintain and reproduce themselves not on their own but rather through the planned execution of specific policies and practices carried out by the ideological apparatuses of the state. In the case of Greece, the media and the church play vital roles in the depoliticization of the public and the reproduction of culturally conservative views and attitudes respectively. Media ownership in Greece is in the hands of a few media magnates (mainly industrialists and shipping tycoons), each of whom owns scores of media outlets even though demand lags way behind supply. For international news, Greek mainstream media rely on foreign sources and partnerships with foreign newspapers. The domestic news tends to be largely sensationalistic in nature and scope, with heavy emphasis on celebrities and lifestyle. Naturally, none of the mainstream media outlets are advocates of a progressive socio-economic agenda. They are all in favor of economic liberalization policies and extol the virtues of the free-market system while their owners maintain deep ties with the state, which of course go beyond the media industry (direct state funding and various forms of indirect subsidies) and extend into their primary business activities. As for the Greek Orthodox Church, which has a strong presence in every geographical region of the country, it has always been close to conservative and right-wing ideologies and practices.

The question, “Why is Mitsotakis’s government so popular?” doesn’t have a straightforward answer. Most polls indicate that large majorities voted for New Democracy because of perceived better future prospects under a Mitsotakis government. In essence, what this says is that the success of New Democracy is really all about the failure of Syriza as an alternative option. Be that as it may, the next four years are going to be a real challenge for the Mitsotakis government. The European Union rules about government budget deficits (3 percent of GDP) and debt (60 percent) to GDP ratios, which had been suspended since 2020 due to the pandemic will end in 2024. So, austerity will soon again be in full swing throughout Europe, and especially in Greece because of the country’s unsustainable debt-to-GDP ratio, which now stands at close to 180 percent. In sum, it is highly unlikely that Mitsotakis will be able to keep his campaign promises about raising wages, salaries and pensions; reducing further the value-added tax rates; improving the public health care system, which has myriad problems due to lack of proper funding and large-scale inefficiencies; and tackling inequality.

Migration in Europe has become a contested issue, though it is probably accurate to say that it is not a defining issue as it is in the United States. Was immigration an important determinant in the electoral success of New Democracy, given that the Mitsotakis government has taken a tough line on migrants since coming to power in 2019 and pledged ahead of the first election in May 2023 to extend the border wall with Turkey?

It is quite accurate to say that migration is not among the top issues of concern for most European citizens, and thus it is not as prominent a wedge issue as immigration is in the United States. Rising prices, the international situation, energy supply, the environment and climate change were seen by far as the more important national issues facing the European Union, according to [a survey](#) released in June 2023. Here, it is also important to underline for context that “in Europe, immigration accounted for 80 percent of the population growth between 2000 and 2018, while in North America, it constituted 32 percent in that same period,” [according to](#) the International Monetary Fund.

In Greece, survey after survey reveals that citizens regard issues related to the cost of living and the economy in general as most important to them, but issues such as public health and the environment also figure prominently. It is also worth noting that climate change and the destruction of the environment rank in various polls as the most serious problems facing the planet. In [one survey](#) conducted in 2022, only 9 percent of respondents ranked immigration as a major threat to the country. And in [a poll](#) released just a few days before the May 2023 elections, the cost of living, public health and low wages were listed as the most important issues facing Greek citizens, with immigration far down on the list.

Having said that, there is also no doubt that many Greek citizens have approved of Mitsotakis’s tough border policy in reducing the flow of migrants. But perhaps this should not be surprising considering the fact that until several years ago, the overwhelming majority of what the Mitsotakis government calls “illegal” immigrants who arrived into Europe came through Greece. The number of asylum seekers in the Greek islands has fallen dramatically in the course of the last few years, largely through pushbacks, which have been widely criticized by human rights organizations and extensively covered by the media. Pushbacks are of course illegal under international law. However, insufficient attention has been paid to “push-forwards” by the Turkish Coast Guard and the smuggling of migrants.

Unfortunately, it is the right that has succeeded in enforcing its agenda on migration, just as it has on a host of other issues. The left's response has been to adopt a softer stance on the specific issue but without really offering a blueprint for a fair and humane immigration system. When he was prime minister, it should be noted, Tsipras opposed taking down the Evros fence at the border between Greece and Turkey. In addition, as opposition leader, he supported the decision of the Mitsotakis government in early 2020 to close the border along the Evros River when Turkey unilaterally opened its borders to Greece to allow many thousands of refugees and migrants to reach the European Union. But most of Syriza's supporters seem to be against the border fence and in favor of the free movement of migrants.

It is important for the left to strike a balance between national and international solidarity, but that is easier said than done, which is why there have never been specific answers from leftist leaders to queries from working-class people whether countries with high rates of unemployment and low wages can afford to have uncontrolled migratory flows. Indeed, [European data](#) on living conditions showed that in 2022, more than 95 million in the EU were at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Would therefore uncontrolled migrations to Europe improve or cause further deterioration of living conditions in the continent? The truth of the matter is that any leader of a left party eyeing power in today's Europe would prefer that this question wasn't asked!

To answer now directly your question, I don't believe that immigration on its own played a critical role in the electoral success of New Democracy. It may have played a part but only in conjunction with voters' belief that Mitsotakis is better equipped as prime minister to deal with the pressing economic issues facing the country and its people.

Do the Greek elections offer any lessons for the left in general?

We may have an ontological problem here in the sense that it has become evidently very difficult to define what constitutes left-wing politics in this day and age. There is always of course a structural gap between theory and practice, but it seems that this gap has become increasingly huge in today's political universe. Today's left is having a very hard time convincing voters that it presents a viable alternative to the status quo even though discontent is extremely widespread across the world, with inequality being at the core of the politics of discontent.

But if there is anything the case of Greece's Syriza party teaches us it is that a left without class politics is a losing proposition. Historically, left-wing parties have always had strong links with working-class people and communities, but this is no longer the case today. Hence the reason why the working class has embraced right-wing populism.

Secondly, a party of the left cannot become a catch-all party. Indeed, ever since the 1990s, all over Europe, catch-all parties have been weakening. Syriza did not learn this lesson and tried to transform itself into an inclusivist populist party to the point of even seeking to attract voters from the now-defunct neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn. The end result was that it lost the left.

Thirdly, a party of the left needs a distinctive programmatic profile and willingness to fight for viable alternatives while also acknowledging the structural constraints of fully realizing those objectives in the course of just a few years after coming to power.

Finally, a strategy for winning an election must be based on the core values of the left. Lies and empty promises will come back to haunt a left party's leadership and ultimately set back the case for radical change.

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